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Communicative Action via Internet Technologies

by Jonathan Kaye

(Philosophy 1800)

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to analyze the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, focusing on his theory of communicative action. In his work, Habermas specifically probes the epistemological question; how human beings can know anything at all? Through an interconnected scheme of: survival challenges, knowledge and action; there is found grounding for the physical sciences, the social sciences and philosophy itself. Communicative action becomes the “glue” that holds society together in reference to those sciences, for Habermas, communicative action is how shared meaning about the world is established and it is through communicative action and based on communicative action that humanity can be gauged on a progressive path to freedom from social domination. Habermas used his theory to critique mass communication such as news and entertainment within that framework. This paper expands that critique asking the pros and cons of the use of social media for mass communication; suggesting that in many aspects it is a positive force for the furthering of knowledge through communication, however there may be limits and distortions to communication that inhibit the growth of further knowledge due to the use of technology that leads to a lack of face to face connection.

Jürgen Habermas was born in Dusseldorf, Germany in 1929. As the Nazi party came to power in 1933 his family moved to Gummersbach, where he would grow up. In 1939 he was enlisted in the Hitler youth, in which he served and later was drafted as a military reservist for the homeland defense until in 1944. After the war, Habermas became interested in the philosophical existentialist movement. His major influences at that time were Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Habermas would break with much of existentialist study eventually, due to Heidegger’s refusal to abandon his pro-Nazi stance even a decade after the regime had fallen.

Beginning his academic career at the Frankfurt School where he would be educated in the thought of Critical Theory, Habermas came under the tutelage of such thinkers as Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979). The Frankfurt School had long followed the Marxist method of social critique. Habermas’ mentors would apply this Marxist critique to the capitalist state, to freedom and equality. They would argue these ideals of freedom and equality, were for the wealthy and not all people. They contended that, what they called Humanistic Marxism, did not conflict with liberal ideals, but just the reality in which those ideals existed, claiming that liberalism both legitimated and contradicted modern capitalism. (Ingram 5)

In his preliminary academic career, Habermas would pursue studies in sociology and economics, earning a master of social science degree. He spent his time developing a theory of psychoanalytic social critique. He argued that ideology was a mass social delusion and that along with unthinking conformity to authority are social neuroses, grounded in societal repression of basic instincts aimed at individual and social fulfillment. His conclusion was that further emancipation of society came through unlimited and undistorted communication.

By 1964, Habermas replaced his mentors and became the chair of philosophy and Sociology at Frankfurt. In 1971, in pursuing linguistics, Habermas developed a philosophy of language and investigated the relation between moral development and a theory of rational communicative competence. Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action was published in 1984. In this work he argued that communicative action was a basic necessity for the evolution of society. Furthermore, he added that economic and administrative tendencies serve in undermining democratic ideals implicit

in interaction and communication.

The pursuit of this paper will be to investigate and explicate Habermas' theory of communicative action with practical applications to today's society. I will discuss the implications of Habermas' theory in view of the current form of global social communication. I will take on Habermas' communication theory to assess the state of communication in society with the advancement of technologies that instantaneously, and potentially without limit or distortion, connect people for the purpose of communication. I shall frame Habermas' arguments in reference to the arguments that brought his stance about; questions of knowledge and action as well as those on the relationships between science and philosophy. I will layout his major theses, defining major terms of importance, for the purpose of representing his argument in a critique of mass communication.

Communication is one of those terms that becomes difficult to define without using the term itself in the definition. As a form of communication, language uses a system of symbols that represent ideas; therefore, it is not communication itself. Communication is a system, an anthology of separate but related methods to convey ideas and thoughts. Methods of communication will not be discussed, because investigations into kinesics and non-verbal communication are not necessary for this paper, I will consult the use of verbal and written language communication only and the mediation therein. What is important is the conveyance of thoughts and ideas through language.

When I say something about something, I am also saying that I know something about something. For instance in this paper I am saying something about Habermas, therefore I imply that I know something about Habermas. Before an attempt to discuss communication can be made; we must first discuss knowledge. Historically there have been basically two ways that philosophers claim that humans answer the question of how we know what we know. The two views of knowledge have, through time, been thought to be separate and opposed, which has led many philosophers to look at the dilemma in the terms, of reason vs. experience.

On the one side there have been philosophers, who follow René Descartes, (1596-1650) who in his *Meditations* doubts the reliability of experience of physical objects. The view holds on to a subjective world of thought as the means of knowing, through reasoning, of one's own existence. On the other side of the debate, are those who say that all knowledge comes from experience, such as David Hume (1711-1776) in *Concerning Human Understanding*. One comes to expect something to occur only because it has repetitively and reliably on past occasions. The debate casts scientific empiricism vs. philosophic rationality. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his, *Critique of Pure Reason*, argues that pure reason is unreliable, Kant however applies reason to knowledge inquiries of natural phenomena in experience which constitutes both knowledge of the self and the world. Kant attempts to bridge the gap of dissent between reason and experience by creating a scientific use for reason concerning natural phenomena in which a synthesis of reason and experience occurs to connect thoughts and organize the experience.

Habermas addresses two major movements that come from these developments: scientism and nihilism. Habermas explains positivism is a form of scientism initiated by Auguste Comte (1789-1859) and then later expanded upon by Karl Popper (1902-1994), arguing that interpretations of events are meaningless as they cannot be observed, that theories are only useful as much as they provide falsifiable hypotheses and that philosophic reflection was insufficient compared to the scientific method, therefore positivism is morally uncertain. Popper argued that social moral norms could not be universally verified and must be accepted on faith. In his work *Knowledge and Human Interest*, Habermas calls Popper uncritical and reactionary. (46) He argues that norms can be evaluated for consistency and consequences, in order to further ends that can be tested against ideals and universal interests. Habermas realizes here that he has a problem of finding the ideals and interests; that humans have developed false desires in the modern cycle of work and consumption. He answers this problem with the idea that language is holistic and contextual. Rule governed speech acts that coordinate around a way of life become meaningful when they are structured, constituted

and identified by the intentions of an actor. Therefore, this intentional action can be understood and interpreted, within the context of a way of life. Language and action then express norms and interest that are publically demonstrable and capable of regulating private moral decisions. Habermas criticizes positivism as a contradiction. Since the idea of science as the only reliable source of knowledge is not a science itself; it fails its own criteria. Therefore, positivism does not justify science. Habermas wants to develop a science that explains the meaning of human actions; that can find a new way to gain an understanding of the action and intention.

Nihilism is founded in opposition to the philosophies of Georg Hegel (1770-1831) and Karl Marx (1818-1883); they both argued reason to be emancipatory. Hegel argued reason to be the human spirit. Marx argued that reason with technology would lead to universal freedom. Friederich Nietzsche (1844-1900) would argue however that reason is but a tool of a will to power, to gain control of nature. He also claimed that by freeing agents from nature, reason binds agents to social laws; reason dominates! Nihilism implies that the will creates meaning and value, therefore nothing has intrinsic value and there is no meaning in experience. To gain freedom from the domination of reason, one must abandon reason's control over action through morality and norm boundaries thereby shedding morality, one becomes elite. What occurs, in nihilism, is that instead of a reasonable science aimed at understanding the world of material and ideal, for the purpose of advancing the human species toward freedom, there is a scientific rational aimed at controlling humans and nature through natural behavioral science.

Habermas argues that natural sciences cannot aid any understanding of morality and social actions on the part of the actor. While his most recent predecessors, such as Heidegger, had advised a morally relativistic new science approach that explains action based on each individual society's use of science and technology, Habermas wants to employ a science that is more universal. His argument is that a moral cultural relativity leads to a lack of true critique. Standards of critique become subject to each circumstance, therefore each circumstance is understood by its own standard. Therefore, if a society were to choose a nihilistic mode of thought, and were to experiment on humans, against their will, then that society could claim justification based on their own moral standard, giving insight to cultural justification of actions but failing to understand any true general human moral standard.

In order to have a science that can claim knowledge to aid the pursuit of finding grounding for a human moral standard, Habermas shows how it is possible to use critical theory with practical intent in the general interest of human beings. His first thesis in developing this science is, "the achievements of the transcendental subject have their basis in the natural history of the human species". (Knowledge and Human Interests 312) This transcendental subject is the entire shared subjective experience; it is the subjective experience of the entire human species. In looking to human evolution and the emergence of culture, by combining the objective and subjective experience, there can be an understanding of the human nature and the human drive through reasoning to be free from nature.

There are three categories of knowledge each of which is oriented by non-subjective values or interests. This knowledge is necessary for survival and possesses unique methods for refining basic kinds of survival based action. The human being is met with three basic survival challenges that correspond to the three knowledge categories: natural scarcity, absence of social coordination and social domination. These three challenges each in turn bring about certain interests: to gain technical control over the environment, to unite with others around common values, and freedom. These interests are then realized with certain kinds of action. Instrumental action which is experimental, is based on behavioral feedback, this action constitutes knowledge of a sense world of material objects. Communicative action finds mutual understanding of a social world of persons, norms, and meanings connected by a reflective narrative. Finally, critical reflection examines the causes of beliefs, to discover and remove impediments to knowledge. Therefore, from instrumental action actors receive material knowledge, from communicative action they form social knowledge, and from reflective

thought actors gain knowledge of what hinders knowledge. (KHI II)

Reason serves to preserve the species and functions as an evolutionary adaptation. Here we can think of reason as philosophical reflection, gaining knowledge of knowledge, but, this reflection is also more than knowledge it is also practice. “In the power of self-reflection, knowledge and interest are one.” (KHI 314) Unconscious human desire coupled with conscious reflection shows an option. Instead of being compelled toward the unconscious desire, reflection frees the agent to choose an action based on values beyond instinctive survival. Therefore, Habermas also states that, “knowledge serves as an instrument of and transcends mere self-preservation”. (KHI 313)

Instrumental actions serve an experimental role. For instance, C then E is a statement of knowledge that cannot be verified unless you remove C in order to observe whether you still have E. Observing in itself is not enough to gain knowledge that is reliable. Habermas is showing the validity of applied reason in scientific knowledge. “Meanings of properties are defined in terms of instrumental action.” (KHI 130) Instrumental action establishes powers and properties that distinguish causal knowledge from random association through habit, by employing the experimental method over time actors come to have genuine knowledge constituting a transcendent material world. Through instrumental action, knowledge is also obtained as to how the world of material objects responds to what the actor does; it is dialectic of material well-being between subject and object. Knowledge that is gained is then applied to unburden agents of functions; imposing them unto technological instruments. The invention of the wheel is an example of a result of this kind of action. Instead of having to carry my load on my back, I can load a cart that is wheeled and push or pull it. This kind of technological progress necessitates a community of investigators which is held together by communication that tests hypothesis for results to reach accepted conclusions. (Ingram)

Communicative action is how mutual agreement and understandings of meanings, values and norms constitute identification, in which the self requires others in recognition to form a biography. These biographies apply to both the entire human condition as well as the context of the intentions of the individual agents involved. These intentions need to be understood to understand the meaning of action. Understanding action creates familiarity of the new by proxy to what is already known through communication between an internal self and self-story as well as, an external communication between the self and others. Communicative action forms social worlds of social organization. Within this social organization Habermas says that “knowledge constitutive interest take form in the medium of work, language and power.” (KHI 313) Work corresponds to instrumental action, language to communicative action, and power to reflection.

“The structure of communication anticipates truth, freedom, justice and happiness.” (KHI 314) Language is communicative action involving agents who are free of distortion with the use of reason in the aim of reaching understanding through argumentation that raises validity claims. When an actor speaks they are speaking to be understood, they must say something that can be understood, therefore they must attempt to be understood and in turn reach a mutual agreement with another. Communication can continue only if validity claims that are mutually argued are understood to be justified. (What is Universal Pragmatics? 2) If an actor thinks validity claims to be justified, they engage in discourse or, argumentative speech in which, they give reasons for the claim. Then the hearing actors in this situation can then either accept the reasons or give his/her own reasons against them for understanding. This argumentative discourse is used “to bring about an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust and accord with one another.” (WUP 3) Through argumentation the actors realize one material world as well as the transcendence or interchangeability of the personal experience of phenomena.

From argumentative speech there is explicit then, a communicative rationality that is the use of reason in having knowledge of what is sound in an argument. This rationality is employed to judge claims, as well as defend them against rational criticism. Therefore, arguments can be made beyond the material into moral claims based on communicative action; these claims can be judged rationally,

can satisfy reason, or be argued about until mutually reasonable and agreeable to all parties engaged and then be defended by reason leading to a consensus of the masses. Habermas thinks he has grounded his new science that looks to reflect philosophically on communicative and instrumental actions in moral terms. (Ingram)

Applying his social critique to society in its current form, there is an argument that the communicative consensus is constrained, because the state has become an agent of a ruling class that through ideology and violence exercises power over the ruled. Traditions have come to conceal the deviation from ideals implicit in communication such as truth, freedom and justice. Communication implies equality of all parties involved since all are engaged in the process of coming to understanding. Traditions and ideologies serve to undermine equality. Religion for example creates a tradition that validates hierarchy and domination such as in medieval kingdoms. Capitalism then abolishes that validation, with the free market that supposes the ideal of universal equality, in which wages become a communicative action of equal exchange for mutual benefit. Ideals of freedom in communication are still lost in capitalism however, as we see, freedom, equality and happiness are the general interest of the social agent, but through consumer freedom and fulfillment, private property and wage labor have created relations between people that are exploitive, undemocratic, unjust and detrimental. Competition breeds inequality because there has to be a loser. In order to win certain values such as honesty and fairness may have to be shed. Hiring the cheapest labor and selling products at the highest value possible are neither fair nor honest. A visit to any of the websites of organizations such as: the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and Human Rights Watch will provide evidence of vast disparity that exists globally; starvation and disease from extreme poverty and grave social injustices including violence and subjugation are found to be imposed upon many peoples.

Habermas argues three major points in his article, *Political Communication in Media Society*. His first issue is a lack of face-to-face interaction between present participants in a shared practice of collective decision making. He follows that there is a lack of reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions. Finally, arguing that the dynamics of mass communication are driven by the power of the media to select, and shape the presentation of, messages and by the strategic use of political and social power to influence the agendas as well as the triggering and framing of public issues. (PCMS 14-15) In the globalized public sphere, political and social powers are exercised with the backing of economic power at a near universal level, taking place in the realms of campaign finance and commercial advertising especially in the more economically and technologically developed nations. Economically powerful interests, through their own capital, influence what the audience will perceive their choices to be. Therefore, the economic power structure of the public sphere may well distort the dynamics of mass communications. (PCMS 418) Furthermore, social deprivation and cultural exclusion of citizens explain the selective access to and uneven participation in mass communication, whereas the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives leads to a peculiar paralysis of civil society. (PCMS 421-422) What then is necessary to promote further removal of distortions and limitations to communication for the purpose of removing roadblocks to freedom and happiness?

Habermas argues that, “we should not seek the explanation in the paralyzed state of civil society but in the content and formats of a degenerating kind of political communication itself,” pointing out that, “issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment and advertising; besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promote civic privatism and a mood of anti-politics”. (PCMS 422)

In expanding Habermas’ argument to include the use of internet technologies I argue that while Habermas is correct in pointing to the connection between entertainment and politics, the argument should be that forms of entertainment and social networks can be formats for political

debate; the issue is still that economic power is the cause of any inequality in those formats. Who gets heard is whoever can afford to pay to be heard. While it is true that there is a large amount of anonymity online, allowing agents to be free from fear, it is also recognized then, that this anonymity can be used to distort information. Instead of pointing to the anonymous aspect as problematic the focus should be on the reasons for the possibility of distortions, namely power relations relating to economics and politics.

Mass communication has proven itself to be a social power in the face of economic and political power. For example, social media networks aided the organization of people's risings in: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syria during the recent Arab Spring, although the outcomes of these situation are quite unsure. Political issues are debated between every-day people on a daily basis, from war to homosexual marriage, nearly the world over. The obstacles to consensus are not in the format of communication, the disconnection is between the people and their policy makers. Looking back to the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003, there was a breakdown in the discourse concerning the debate over the invasion. Almost unanimously there was no news media network that spoke against the war, in circumstances where people did show dissent they were silenced and ignored. An example is Phil Donahue from MSNBC, a news commentator who was fired for expressing his objection to the beginning of hostilities against Iraq and Afghanistan following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

There was a state sanctioned control over communication to sway perception of the circumstances. Therefore, while mass communication is a power in the face of power, it is still one that can be managed by a controlling class working in their own interest and not those of the human species, gaining personal profit at the expense of the freedom of others. The removal of powerful economic interest from social and political communication networks is necessary to alleviate the skewed power relations that allow this kind of control to occur. Communication is an exchange of ideas that implies equality, when the very issues debated are controlled this equality is lost. The internet does provide an avenue to expand upon debated issues with hopes of restoring equality.

The use of the internet in some respect allows a level of equality of opportunity of exchange, yet, fails to grant a total equality. I say there is the opportunity for equality because everyone who can gain access to the internet can make their mark in cyberspace; this does not guarantee an audience however. True face to face contact would.

Finally, communication has taken one wound for sure in the deterioration of language in itself that is beginning to occur with the growth of net-speak such as, lol, hmu, smh, r u thr, so on... I would argue that this "on-the-go" lifestyle that has taken over portions of the developed world has caused the issue where our culture of technology allows people to be so connected to everything around the clock; from work to the news, from family to personal relations that many begin to feel so pressed for time that even the language used suffers.

The human species survives based upon its ability to gain information, judge that information and act upon it in a continuous and cyclical system that enhances techniques to finding information, deciding what information is valuable and how best to act upon that information. The systems of enhancement are held together by their deliberative fashion utilizing communication to build consensus. Since communication is universal among humans, and it is utilized to build mutual understanding and trust in its conception, it is a basis for establishing a universal code of ethics. A universal code of ethics can be set forth through communication, reason and evidence. Gauging the level of communication and exchange of real information gives insight to the health of a society. In this sense communicative action, as theory, provides a comprehensive tool that can bring insight to issues including: economic imbalances, power struggles, and distortions to what is knowledge in itself.

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- Key of abbreviated terms: KHI - Knowledge and Human Interest
- PCMS - Political Communication in Mass Society